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<http://www.arts.qld.gov.au/aq-blog/employment-and-training/5041-art-changing-the-world-one-person-at-a-time>

Art changing the world: one person at a time

Following the extreme social stresses of high school, a lot of young people on the autism spectrum retreat to their bedrooms and computers to hibernate for extended periods of time. Online gaming communities and digital media hubs often provide a more accessible forum for young adults on the autism spectrum to establish and maintain social connections. A recent study suggests that school leavers on the autism spectrum in Queensland spend an average of 9.5 hours per day (68 hours per week) engaged in solitary technology-based activities. While this astonishing figure has its foundations in the sobering fact that most of these young people have limited social networks and experience significant anxiety and depression, it also serves to illustrate the extraordinary skill sets that these extended hours of technological engagement can facilitate.

In order to engage this isolated and at-risk population of young people, Autism Queensland developed and launched Studio G, the first of its post-school transition programs for young adults with high functioning autism. Studio G, based at the State Library of Queensland, is an interactive workshop that supports young people with high functioning autism to build on their interests and strengths in screen based media such as gaming and game development, animation, short film making, graphic design, music and creative writing to help support them in a successful transition to work, training or tertiary study.

Studio G employs mentors with experience in screen-based creative design and project development to lead participants on a journey of creative engagement. These mentors are creative industry graduates who are trained and supported by Autism Queensland to deliver responsive and intuitive support for young people on the autism spectrum. With one mentor for each four participants in the program, we provide a nurturing and dynamic environment where participants can build relationships of trust with skilled and experienced digital arts professionals. The structure of the workshop allows participants to grow at their own pace and, with the assistance of their mentors, to develop and complete their own projects in accordance with goals they themselves have set.

One participant with an interest in drawing and fine art has developed an astounding ability with 3D illustration and animation in a very short space of time. Using programs such as ZBrush and ToonBoom she has created an online gallery of characters and images that are currently being sold as t-shirt and wall art designs on a number of world-wide design websites. With creative mentoring and support from Autism Queensland we hope to facilitate her transition to tertiary study within the next 12 months.

In our first year of operation we have observed program participants making substantial progress in a number of creative industry endeavours and we anticipate formal program evaluation from the Autism CRC later this year to support anecdotal accounts of the positive impact of creative practice as a catalyst for social, job and life skills for young people on the autism spectrum.